

WISH2ACTION project launches in Madagascar: speech by Dr Phil Boyle

It is a great pleasure to attend today's official launch of the WISH2ACTION project: a major new initiative supported by the UK's Department for International Development and implemented by a consortium of partners including Marie Stopes Madagascar, Development Media International, Humanity and Inclusion, and Options.

This is part of a major new investment by the UK in Women's Integrated Sexual Health across Africa. £200 million will be spent in 27 countries to ensure millions of couples can reliably gain access to life-saving voluntary contraception in some of the world's poorest nations. In Madagascar we are investing 10 million Euro over three years in WISH2ACTION. And this will prioritise the poorest and most in need, particularly young, disabled and marginalised women.

Why is the UK doing this? We believe that good voluntary family planning, with women's choice at the centre, contributes to development in every sector and every community. Rapid population growth – and it is currently at 2.5% a year in Madagascar – will undermine development if infrastructure, healthcare, education and job creation cannot keep up. But addressing fertility rates and empowering women will unlock economic growth and prosperity.

And it is the right thing to do. Ten Malagasy women die every day following pregnancy and birth complications. And this death rate has barely changed during the last 20 years, and remains one of the highest in the world. Despite this, maternal and newborn health have seen a decline in donor and international interest. This is a mistake. Improvements in maternal health will have far-reaching impacts on the achievement of Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals.

My wife and I were lucky enough to celebrate the birth of our first child a few months ago. We were even luckier, as we received excellent care both here in Madagascar and in the UK. But it is the sad truth that most Malagasy women, especially in rural areas, cannot aspire to even a basic level of care. And this is something that urgently needs to be addressed.

The UK's vision is of a world where everyone can fully exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights. Where the quality services, supplies and information needed for this are available to all. Where no mother or baby dies needlessly before, during or after birth. Where the AIDS epidemic is at an end. Where all girls and women live with dignity, free from stigma, violence and harmful social norms.

We believe that women and girls have the fundamental right to make their own informed decisions about sex and childbearing, to avoid unwanted sexual contact, to decide when and how many children to have, and to face fewer

risks in the course of pregnancy and childbirth.

So we are using our political leadership to make the case for protecting and supporting reproductive rights. And we're supporting countries to ensure those rights, especially for the most left behind, are a key element of their efforts to tackle poverty. That is why the UK is the largest donor to the UNFPA, and the world's second largest bilateral donor for family planning.

This WISH2ACTION programme therefore seeks to improve access to sexual health and reproductive services to couples across Madagascar. Running until September 2021, it will form a major part of the UK's effort to improve and increase the development cooperation between our two islands. And to ensure sustainability beyond the life of the programme, we will work with the government of Madagascar to bolster its own capacity to provide longer-term services. This project is in line with the Malagasy government's Family Planning 2020 goals and will support the demographic dividend. National ownership at the end of the project is key.

We welcome the passing of the new family planning law in 2017, and I would like to underline the importance of implementing it by health providers at the field level to ensure access to services by adolescents.

In addition, a key part of the WISH2ACTION approach is to provide contraceptive advice and products. By necessity, these are imported, and those distributed by Marie Stopes are subject to import taxes. It would be wonderful as a next step if thought could be given, Mr Director-General, to ways in which exemptions on the taxation of family planning products could be provided. This move would be of great support to both this programme and the overall Plan Emergence Madagascar objectives. Even better would be greater engagement by the Government of Madagascar in the supply of family planning products itself.

I'd like to thank you, Mr Director-General, for all your support so far, and I look forward to continuing our work together. And I'd like to thank Marie Stopes and all the other partners for their inspiring work and enthusiasm for this programme. It is their complementing expertise that makes me so confident that this will be the beginning of a partnership in Madagascar that has genuine impact, delivers real results, and makes a strong contribution to a brighter future for this wonderful country.